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Constructivism and Rationalism as Analytical Lenses: The Case of the European Neighbourhood Policy

Petr Kratochvíl and Elsa Tulumets

Abstract: *The paper proposes a novel way in which social constructivism and rationalism might be combined in the study of the EU's external relations. It proceeds in four steps: First, a basic model for the study of EU external policies is introduced, with its four basic elements being based on different combinations of constructivism and rationalism. Second, existing theories are categorised in accordance with the model. Third, a case study exploring the relations of three countries in the EU's Eastern neighbourhood (Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia) with the Union is introduced, through which the practical applicability of the model is demonstrated. Fourth, the paper concludes with some theoretical remarks.*

Keywords: *European Neighbourhood Policy, EU external policies, social constructivism, social rationalism*

Introduction¹

The debate between rationalists and constructivists remains one of the defining theoretical axes in the field of international relations as well as that of European studies. A number of scholars have explored the key points of discord between the two approaches (for instance, Katzenstein 1999; Pollack 2000; Finnemore 2001; Lezaun 2002). But the first phase of constructivist theorizing, which focussed primarily on metatheoretical issues, made a deeper engagement between constructivism and rationalism difficult to achieve. Only slowly, with the “descension” of the constructivist research to the systematic analysis of empirical questions, a more fruitful dialogue between the two approaches became possible (one of the first attempts at this was made already in 1999 in the special issue of the *Journal of European Public Policy* dedicated to constructivism in European studies). Those trying to bring the two approaches closer together have so far employed two strategies: The first is that of (1) the “bridge-builders”, who aim at a comprehensive synthesis of the two approaches, typically (a) by proposing a *via media* that encompasses elements of both rationalism and constructivism (Adler 1997; Wendt 1999) or (b) by using one of the approaches to attempt a hostile takeover of the other approach, which usually means interpreting one of

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the approaches as part of the other (e.g. Müller 2004; for the original discussion about the (im)possibility of a synthesis, see Keohane 1988; for a critical assessment, see Wiener 2003).² The second is that of “opticians”, who believe that the two approaches should be seen rather as “analytical lenses” that help us to see particular aspects of the world of international politics without necessarily proclaiming that the other lenses are just blindfolds (for the clearest formulation of this, see Fearon – Wendt 2005).

Both of these strategies suffer from serious shortcomings. For the bridge-builders, the most serious of these difficulties lies in the fact that they usually treat the two approaches as grand theories that include not only empirically grounded claims about international politics but also a number of philosophical assumptions that pertain to philosophy of social science, which go far beyond the traditional study of IR. This means that the theoretical synthesis at which they aim would have to include a synthesis of their ontologies (and possibly also epistemologies), which is obviously hardly conceivable. This explains why bridge-builders are so interested in metatheory: it is metatheoretical concerns that are the biggest stumbling blocks on the way to a theoretical synthesis of the two positions.

Another, perhaps more promising line of enquiry is to take rationalism and constructivism as analytical lenses that can be applied or taken off by the analyst as the differing empirical contexts require. The decision about their usefulness and compatibility is thus dependent only on the empirical analysis and not on their metatheoretical presuppositions. Even though this position is less widespread in the study of international relations, some scholars have convincingly argued in favour of this approach (Checkel 1998; Jupille et al. 2003; Fearon – Wendt 2005) and tried to specify conditions for the types of cases in which one or the other approach is more suitable (Checkel 1997; Zürn – Checkel 2005).³

Yet the weakness of these accounts – as innovative as they may be – is that by delimiting the scope conditions for each of the two theories they keep them separate. While bringing the two approaches closer together as two alternative research instruments, they nevertheless insist that when exploring a particular case we have to choose one or the other, or at least break the case study down into two or more sub-studies, each of them with their own rationalist *or* constructivist framework. So, even though these scholars may not be interested in the metatheoretical questions and allegedly aim at a synthesis at the level of methodology, they do not

² We are aware that the metaphor of bridge-building may be seen as imprecise since the “bridge-builders” often aim at a take-over of the alternative position rather than at creating a forum for discussion with the other positions. In spite of these difficulties, we would like to stick to this label since it is widely used in the literature (see the references above).

³ Cf. also Checkel’s comment that “at present, constructivism is, like rational choice, nothing more than a method.” (Checkel 1998: 342)

merge the two approaches as one would expect, but rather focus on the “questions of scope and domains-of-application”, as Checkel argues (Checkel 2005: 805).

This cardinal problem can be demonstrated by referring to the above-mentioned text by Fearon and Wendt (2005). The authors distinguish between three types of choices of rationalism and constructivism: metatheoretical, methodological, and empirical. Their preferred option being methodology, they are convinced that “rationalism and constructivism are most fruitfully viewed *pragmatically* as analytical tools, rather than as metaphysical positions or empirical descriptions of the world” (the emphasis in the original). On the one hand, the rejection of the choice based on philosophical considerations is a clear rejection of the bridge building approach, which in itself is puzzling given the previous position of Alexander Wendt on the issue. However, the rejection of the empirically-grounded choice is even more troubling. If we choose the methodology first and only then approach the empirical world in order to conduct our analysis, we will not be able to be really pragmatic, choosing the method applied as the empirical analysis requires. In addition, by the preference for the methodological choice over the empirical one, Fearon and Wendt reject the very possibility of combining the two methods in one study since this would imply the dependence of the choice(s) on the empirical research.

We argue that these scholars are inconsistent here and that is why our approach is somewhat different. Like Fearon and Wendt, we believe in the possibility, or even the desirability, of pragmatism in the choice between the two approaches. Unlike Fearon and Wendt, however, we are convinced that this pragmatic choice must be ultimately based on the empirical situation to which our analytical tools are applied. Once we deny the necessary connection between the empirical and our methodological choice, we can no longer talk about pragmatism. Our rejection of the necessity to opt for one or the other alternative methodology in advance also opens up the possibility of combining the two approaches in each of the cases. Indeed the strategy of the bridge-builders is not a fruitful one – and we should give up the illusion of a grand theoretical synthesis encompassing a unified ontology of international relations. While the strategy of the opticians is better equipped for a pragmatic synthesis of rationalism and constructivism, it nevertheless also suffers from a major flaw since it often severs the vital link between the methodological choice and the empirical field.

Our approach stresses the pragmatic, empirically grounded choice of rationalism and constructivism, or even a combination (or several different combinations) of the two. Hence, we believe that in many case studies, the “division of labour” among the two approaches needn’t be defined in advance, but that it will rather follow from the empirical research. This opens a new, so far rarely trodden path of research which can show not only when a particular actor employs the more

utilitarian or normative mode of reasoning and acting, but also how and under what conditions this actor moves from one mode to the other or how it is possible that some actors may behave in both modes simultaneously, depending on their social roles in different international settings.

It is important to stress here that the method discussed here does not mean a concrete methodology (such as structured elite interviews or content analysis). In this sense, our position is again similar to that of Fearon and Wendt, who claim that, for instance, the assumption of exogenous preferences is a methodological convenience (2005: 53), even though the assumption clearly does not translate into any concrete methodology. What we mean by analytical lenses is that after our careful empirical study, we declare an actor rationalist or constructivist based on its concrete actions, which we study, even though we are fully aware that no actor is purely rationalist or purely normative. That is why we call our ideal-typical generalisation and the simultaneous neglect of other features of the actor “analytical lenses” instead of claiming that our labels fully exhaust and capture the “real” characteristics of the actor.

In our study, we will proceed in four steps: First, focusing on EU foreign policy, we will introduce our model, which offers four different combinations of rationalism and constructivism. Second, we will show that most existing theories explaining the EU’s relations with its neighbours that would be difficult to define as purely rationalist or constructivist fit nicely into our model. Third, we will introduce our empirical study, which explores the relations of three countries in the EU neighbourhood (Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova) towards the Union. In this way, we will shed more light on the dynamic dimension of our model. Fourth, we will draw some theoretical conclusions from the case study.

Constructivism and rationalism: Four models of EU external relations

Before presenting our model, we should define the two “isms” that we are trying to combine. Indeed, the number of definitions of the two is very high and still growing. Alexander Wendt defines the two basic tenets of constructivism as “(1) that the structures of human associations are determined primarily by shared ideas rather than material forces, and (2) that the identities and interests of purposive actors are constructed by these shared ideas rather than given by nature.” (Wendt 1999: 1) Other scholars agree; some of them come up with strikingly similar definitions. Jeffrey Checkel, for instance, defines constructivism as “an approach to social inquiry based on two assumptions: (1) the environment in which agents/states take action is social rather as well as material and (2) this setting can provide agents/states with understanding of their interests.” (Checkel 1998: 325)

Other theorists are very critical of the mainstream interpretation of constructivism, which is summed up in the two definitions above. Stefano Guzzini, for instance, is adamant in insisting that “constructivism... is epistemologically about the *social construction of knowledge*, and ontologically about the *construction of social reality*” (the emphasis in the original), thus implying that the marriage of US mainstream constructivism with positivism is a mistake that overlooks a large part of what constructivism really is – a position that relativizes many of the positivist knowledge claims. Another critical point often raised by opponents of mainstream constructivism pertains to the role of language in social constructivism, which plays no role whatsoever in the works of Alexander Wendt. Yet it is exactly language (and the related linguistic turn), as they argue, that lay at the roots of social constructivism in international relations. For Nicholas Onuf, one of the founding fathers of constructivism in IR, language plays a central role in the approach: “On ontological grounds, constructivism challenges the positivist view that language serves *only* to represent the world as it is. Language also serves a constitutive function. By speaking, we make the world what it is.” (Onuf 2002: 126)

The problem with the definition of rationalism may seem easier since unlike constructivists, rationalists usually do not label themselves as such (except when engaging in metatheoretical debates) and instead identify themselves with particular substantive theories such as neorealism and neoliberal institutionalism. But in fact the problem of definition is even more complex here – rationalism is a very broad category that includes (1) theories stressing the rationality of actors as their main defining feature (contrasted to theories that defend irrational or normative motivations for action), (2) approaches that prefer material over ideational factors, and also (3) a host of theories which start from the assumption of methodological (or, in some cases, ontological) individualism (contrary to approaches that stress the role of structures in social life). It is obvious that theories that are rationalist in the first sense do not have to be rationalist in the second, etc. As a result, we are confronted with a large number of widely different approaches, all of which can be classified as rationalist in some sense. This is the reason why Fearon and Wendt claim that “as used in IR context, ‘rationalism’ seems to refer variously to formal and informal applications of rational choice theory to IR questions, to any work drawing on the tradition of microeconomic theory from Alfred Marshall to recent developments in evolutionary game theory, or most broadly to any ‘positivist’ exercise in explaining foreign policy by reference to goal-seeking behavior.” (Fearon – Wendt 2005: 54)

Given the problems related to the multiplicity of definitions of both constructivism and rationalism, we tried to define both of them in a way (1) that would be clearly identifiable as connected with one of the two approaches, (2) that would not endanger our strategy, dragging us into metatheoretical issues that are not our

concern here, and (3) that would be, at the same time, sufficiently specific so as to allow an empirical analysis contrasting one of the approaches to the other. Hence, constructivism as we will discuss it here is rather narrowly defined as the conviction that ideas matter and that the basic behavioural mode of social actors is rule-following. To rephrase the definition somewhat differently, actors' (intersubjectively constructed) identities require compliance with internalised norms irrespective of whether these norms bring these actors additional benefits or not.

Rationalism, on the other hand, is defined as the conviction that social actors try to maximise their self-interest (which may be both material and ideational) and that they rationally manipulate their environment (which may be both material and ideational) to reach their ends. This implies that while rationalism is based on the actors' ability of self-reflection, leaving more space for agency, constructivism is more sceptical regarding this ability, and tends to take on more structural features. However, we should be quick to add that this in no way means that rationalism and constructivism constitute direct opposites in the agency-structure debate (Wendt 1987; Hopf 1998) since constructivism can (and in our case, it indeed does) focus on actors as well, particularly if their normative environment is changing. For instance, the still thriving research on the Europeanization of national bureaucracies and policies in EU member states is a clear case in point since notwithstanding the importance of the normative structure represented by the European Union, the major focus is clearly on the attributes of the actors (member states, sub-state bureaucracies and institutions, etc.)

The distinction between constructivism and rationalism that we introduced here comes very close to (but is not entirely identical with) the Weberian notions of goal-instrumental (*zweckrationales Handeln*) and traditional actions (*traditionelles Handeln*). While the first kind of action is reflective and purely instrumental, and its aim is the maximization of the actor's own utility, the traditional action is rule-oriented, either in the form of unconscious compliance with customs and traditions or in the form of an explicit yet still irrational acceptance of a (social, cultural, or religious) norm (or norms) as the guiding principle of one's behaviour. Since the former is reflective and the latter is not, Weber sometimes differentiates between "action" (*Handeln*) as the appropriate label for the first and "behaviour" (*Verhalten*) for the second.

Although we believe that this definition of rationalism and constructivism is widely acceptable to the adherents of both streams, it nevertheless brings to the fore some problematic features of the representation of all social action in this simplified dichotomy. Weber himself operates with two more types of social action: value-rational action (*wertrationales Handeln*) and emotional action (*emotionales Handeln*). A value-rational action is an action that has a fixed goal which is rationally followed. However, the goal itself (which may be transcendental/religious,

broadly ideological, or purely material) is not questioned. The means applied to reach the goal can be rationally chosen but their negative side-effects or inappropriateness (or immorality) can never outweigh the positive value that is attached to the desired goal.

It is tempting to assume that if the European Union as an actor in international relations behaves in the “constructivist” manner we have just described, the same is automatically true for its external partners. Yet there are numerous examples of studies which show that the external partners often do not respond in the same way but rather try to promote their own very differently defined interests. This pertains to the ties between the EU and the US (Kagan 2002), EU-Russia relations (Kratochvíl 2008) and many other relations. In other words, it is often the case that we are not presented with a unified world – be it purely constructivist or purely rationalist, but a world in which different actors employ different behavioural modes.

The four combinations of rationalism and constructivism in the study of the relations between the EU and its external partners can be shown in a simple table (Table 1).

Table 1: The four combinations of rationalism and constructivism in the study of the relations between the EU and its external partners

European Union	External country	
	Normative actor	Rational actor
Normative actor	Strong constructivism	Weak constructivism
Rational actor	Weak rationalism	Strong rationalism

The first position is that of “strong constructivism”. Here, both the EU and the external actor are essentially rule-followers and their behaviour is directly linked to their (potential or actual) identities. Cooperation and conflict between the two are interpreted as a parameter of the proximity and compatibility of their identities. A number of theories of EU actorness operate within this framework. The most conspicuous example is “normative power Europe” (Manners 2002). Manners purges any signs of instrumentality from his approach and sees the relations between the EU and its partners in purely normative terms.⁴ Neither the EU nor the partner countries calculate whether the “transference” of norms brings them some further benefits (op. cit.: 2045). In other situations, the EU sets a “virtuous example” that is followed by others for normative reasons (Coombes 1998). Another group of theories that belong to this category are those which present the difference between EU’s policies and those of the other actors in terms of norms and identity.

⁴ For the time being, let us leave aside the fact that Manners in fact focuses on just one side of the equation, i.e. the EU’s influence on the partners, hence sidelining the opposite effect of the partners upon the Union.

For instance, there are multiple studies which cast the misunderstandings between the EU and its partners (United States, Turkey, Russia and others) in normative terms (Kratochvíl 2008).

The second position is labelled “weak constructivism”. The European Union as the principal focus of these kinds of studies remains a normative actor whose actions are based on its norms and values. The partner country accepts the normative nature of the EU but tries to manipulate EU norms to its own advantage. In these accounts, the EU is sometimes presented not as an actor but rather as the normative context in which rational actors are situated, using EU norms to increase their own benefits. As a result, in “weak constructivism”, the interpretation of the EU as an overarching structure and of states as rational agents comes closest to the agency-structure debate (see above).

One of the many examples of such an approach is the concept of rhetorical action, which is defined as “the strategic use of norm-based arguments” (Schimmelfennig 2001: 48). In other words, the external partners (in this particular case the EU membership candidates) understand that the EU is a community of norms and values, but they themselves are external rational actors who can convince the EU to agree with the enlargement by reference to the EU’s own principles and past commitments. In other words, while the EU is forced to comply with its norms, the external partners are seen as normatively unconstrained egoists. A different approach, but still within the bounds of weak constructivism, is the one that marks the debate on EU-US relations (e.g. Cooper 2002; Kagan 2002). Although the accents among the scholars who partake in the debate differ, they all depict the EU as a norm-ruled community that seldom uses physical force, whereas the United States is described as the typical modern state that devises rational strategies to maintain international order and its own stance on the top of the global hierarchy.

The third type, weak rationalism, is the symmetrical opposite of weak constructivism. The situation which it describes is seemingly less common – the EU is the rational actor that uses its influence to change the behaviour of its external partners. However, the apparent scarcity of theories based on this approach is quite misleading. In fact, a substantial part of the literature on Europeanization in candidate and/or neighbour countries of the EU is based exactly on this model. The European Union carefully chooses those norms and principles to whose adoption priority should be given, in particular during the accession negotiation processes (cf. for example, Ágh 1999), while the candidate states often comply due to their eagerness to belong to the community as soon as possible. Others argue that the same principle applies to the European Neighbourhood Policy, which is seen as the EU’s rational strategy of coping with those who long for EU membership but are unlikely to reach their objective any time in the near future (cf. Smith 2005).

The final position is that of strong rationalism, where institutions are seen as rather irrelevant and all actors pursue their own interests. Constraints stemming from the normative environment are easy to overcome, and sometimes their impact is denied altogether. Hence, a better relationship with the EU or even an EU entry is not seen as beneficial per se, but only if it brings additional benefits such as free trade, greater investment, higher security, influence over strategic decisions of larger states, etc. Strong rationalism can adopt the form of a host of liberal theories or, in more extreme cases, realist accounts of EU external relations. Examples of the former would be the civilian power concept (Duchêne 1973; for a critique, see Bull 1982) or the liberal intergovernmentalist interpretation of the enlargement process (Moravcsik – Vachudova 2003). Here, both the EU and the partner countries are rational utility-maximisers, and both believe that their relations are based on shared interests and mutually beneficial interdependence. Realist accounts of the EU's relations with its partners are also embodiments of strong rationalism. For instance, Grieco's voice opportunity thesis tries to explain the small states' reasons for desiring EU membership without relying too heavily on normative factors (even though Grieco acknowledges some role for the integration institutions) (Grieco 1995).

The main aim of our attempt to bring together the four combinations of constructivism and rationalism in a single model is twofold. First, we want to show that our model is comprehensive enough to accommodate most existing theories of EU external relations. In other words, these theories could be seen as particular instances of the four clusters of theoretical approaches. This allows us to see the implicit yet essential connection between different theories, say Schimmelfennig's concept of rhetorical action (as an example of weak constructivism) and the study of Europeanization (as an instance of weak rationalism). Second, and perhaps more importantly, our aim is to show that our theoretical analysis does not have to be confined to a single quadrant but that a theoretically informed empirical study can show how a bilateral relationship between the EU and an external partner moves from one position to another. This is something none of the above-described theories are able to explain since each of them is built on a single logic of action.

We are aware of the fact that our model has its limitations as well. First of all, it depicts four different situations, but their interconnections are not further developed in our model. As a result the transition from the position of, say, strong constructivism to weak constructivism is not explicitly defined, and the decision about when the shift from the former to the latter takes place must be decided on a case-by-case basis. Secondly, weak constructivism and weak rationalism are identical on the theoretical level. In both cases, one actor prefers a normatively-driven behaviour while the other is rationalist. Our distinction, however, is relevant in the study of EU external relations. There are substantial differences between the

situation of a normative EU and a rationalist external actor (weak constructivism) and that of a rationalist EU and a normative external actor (weak rationalism). The difference is important not in the least due to the fact that in weak constructivism, norms are usually much more important than in weak rationalism since the EU provides a general normative setting, in which the other, rationalist actor (Ukraine, for instance) operates.

Case study: The European Neighbourhood Policy

Research design

To demonstrate the usefulness of our model, we have explored the relations of three countries of Eastern Europe towards the EU in the framework of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). We focus on the ENP for three reasons: First, the academic study of the ENP has been marked by the all-pervading dichotomy of values vs. interests (Haukkala, 2005), which precisely reflects the theoretical distinction of constructivism vs. rationalism that we introduced and modified above. Second, the unified approach of the EU towards all the partner countries participating in the ENP (or at least its Eastern dimension) can be contrasted with the potentially very different interpretations of the policy by the partner countries. As a result, we may get a more varied picture than if we just focussed on one particular bilateral relation. Third, the Policy has been evolving very quickly and it is possible that the changes of the Policy will correspond with the shifts of the relations from one of the four theoretical quadrants to another.

Three countries were chosen from among the ENP partner countries in Eastern Europe - Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia. Our motivation for this choice was twofold: First, these countries represent both countries enthusiastic about the ENP (Georgia) and the strongest critics thereof (Ukraine), both the originally proposed partners (Ukraine and Moldova) and the latecomers (Georgia), and both big partners (Ukraine with more than 46 million inhabitants) and small ones (Georgia and Moldova have slightly more than four million inhabitants each). Second, while some countries indicate that the only objective for them is full EU membership (in particular Ukraine), the others do not stress the accession as the only option, which might indicate a different approach to the EU (possibly a more utilitarian one).

We used two complementary methods. The first was a series of semi-structured one-on-one elite interviews with 16 officials of the three countries (cf. Creswell 1997; Burnham et al. 2008, particularly the chapter on elite interviewing). In seven cases, these officials headed EU departments at the national ministries dealing with European integration (the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of European Integration and the Ministry of Justice). In five cases, they were members or advisors

of parliamentary committees dealing with the EU. The interviews did not focus on the substance of the countries' relations with the EU, but rather on the procedural aspects. Altogether, our standardized questionnaire covered nine broad themes. For instance, one important question pertained to the ways through which agreements were reached (unilateral imposition, arguing, negotiations with concessions from both sides, etc.). Also, questions about motivations for pursuing deeper integration with the EU were asked. The answers ranged from those related to identity and normative concerns to those related to material benefits for the country. The interviews were followed by e-mail communication, clarifying some topics that were not sufficiently discussed during the interviews.

While the first method, interviews, focussed on the partner countries, the secondary method briefly explored the EU side of the equation. We carried out a content analysis of the key documents published by the European Commission concerning these countries and the ENP as a whole. The time span these documents cover is 2003–2007. We used Atlas.ti software for the qualitative analysis, which enabled us to code and cross-analyse a huge amount of data that we would not be able to process using the traditional method of manual coding. In particular, we explored the allusions to values, interests and the related logics of consequences and logics of appropriateness (March – Olsen 1998).

Research findings

The most important information, which was repeatedly stressed in almost every interview, was the shift in the partner countries' approach to the European Union from the politics of identity (the wish to "join Europe") to the politics of pragmatism (the wish to gain benefits). When the ENP was first drafted (at that time, it was titled "the Wider Europe Initiative"), the countries included in it took a wary stance towards it. Their main concern was that the objective of the policy might be an avoidance of further enlargement. This perception was particularly strong in Ukraine. As one interviewee insisted, "the policy was created to keep Ukraine out" (interview 1), and the ENP was largely perceived as "an alternative arrangement to enlargement" (ibid.). Even though the policy offered some substantial economic benefits (the most visible of which was the proposed creation of the so-called deep free trade area), Ukraine was very critical of the policy and insisted on its right to become an EU member. To express this seeming paradox in theoretical terms, Ukraine rejected the offer of economic benefits since it felt that its European identity and aspirations were being denied and that these material benefits were offered to deprive Ukraine of its rightful place in the fold of the EU.

The position of Georgia substantially differed from that of Ukraine. Georgian officials did not complain about the policy as loudly as the Ukrainians did since

Georgia was happy that it was invited to join the policy, even if only after the Rose Revolution of 2003. Yet even Georgia did not escape problems with “the common reading” of the policy (interview 2). Georgia also expected the policy to pave the way towards its EU membership and cared a lot about catching up with the other countries, for instance, by demanding a three-year Action Plan instead of the originally proposed five-year one. To sum up, both those who were unhappy about the policy (Ukraine) and those who welcomed it (Georgia and Moldova) were virtually obsessed with the EU membership in the first phase. Ukraine rejected the policy because it feared that it would decrease its chances of an early EU entry, and Georgia and Moldova accepted it since they, on the contrary, believed that it would speed up their progress towards the full membership. All of them clearly saw the membership as primarily related to their European identity and shared values, i.e. in the constructivist terms.

As indicated above, the stress on shared values and a common identity was gradually replaced by the more pragmatic stress on common interests. But what were the reasons for this unexpected “pragmatic turn”? Most importantly, the European Commission, in spite of its original value-laden rhetoric, indicated from the very beginning that the partner countries’ influence on its decisions was very limited. When the interviewees described the discussions about the bilateral Action Plans, the most common phrase was “take it, or leave it” (interview 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6). Several interviewees confirmed that the European Commission insisted that the discussions about the Action Plans should not be called negotiations, but consultations (interviews 2 and 6), thus further decreasing the influence of the partner countries over the final shape of the documents.

Surprisingly, the frequent meetings between the officials from the European Commission and the interviewees led *simultaneously* to the interviewees’ Europeanization *and* their diminished attention to EU membership. The mutual “psychological adjustment” (interview 7) meant that both the partner countries and the EC “learned their lessons” (interview 2), and the partner countries realized that they had to “listen more carefully to Brussels” (interview 7). The resulting tendency in all three analysed countries was that shared values retreated to the background, and technical and administrative cooperation started to occupy a prominent place. As one interviewee from Moldova put it, “we want higher standards, like those in the EU, but the European perspective is not attainable now, and so we focus on pragmatic small steps leading there” (interview 5).

If we rephrase our findings in terms of different logics of action (March and Olsen, 1998), the logic of appropriateness that was so greatly stressed by the partner countries at the beginning slowly gave way to the logic of consequences. When the interviewees were asked about the difference between the original motivation for

participation in the policy and the current objectives, the membership retreated to a position of a hardly attainable vision, or at best a long-term goal. Instead, nearly all of the attention of the countries is focussed on creating a free trade area, facilitating visa procedures, energy cooperation, administrative and judiciary reforms, phytosanitary standards, etc. (interview 8). To put it simply, instead of membership, the relations of these countries with the EU are “all about bringing regulation” (interview 7).

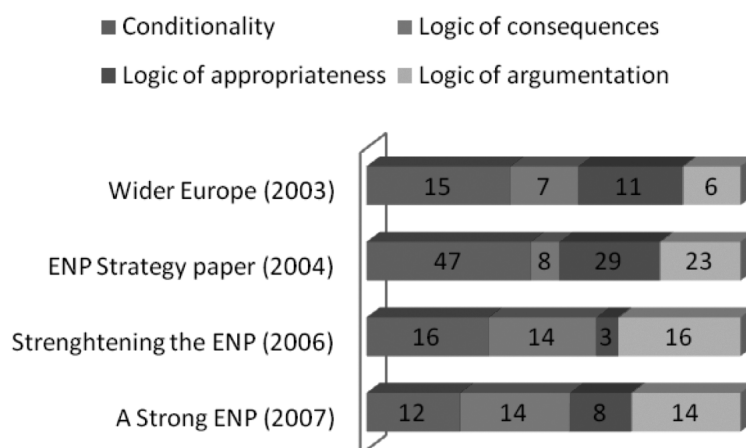
Next to the logic of consequences embodied in the focus on “common interests”, the logic of arguing also appears (cf. Risse 2000). However, unlike in the Habermasian concept of communicative rationality, the logic of arguing as described by the interviewees only pretends to create an environment of equality in which all arguments are rationally weighed and the following action is based on the consensual conclusion. Here, the European Commission does indeed allow for open discussion about all issues but these discussions have no visible effect on the Commission’s proposals. As one interviewee bluntly put it, the official “bilateral documents are purely EU internal documents” (interview 3). According to the majority of the interviewees, the Commission’s open approach aims only at placating “the public and the diplomacy” (interview 5) but it does not have anything to do with the way the Commission prepares its documents.

Despite this negative assessment of the Commission, the same institution is surprisingly seen as the best ally of the partner countries. The interviewees claimed that notwithstanding its unilateral approach, it is “doing more for us than our best friends among the member states” (interview 6) or that the Commission is “on our side against the member states”. Obviously, the Commission succeeded in convincing the partner countries that the red lines regarding enlargement or visa facilitation are imposed upon the Commission by the member states, whose interests it has to balance out. In other words, again the main thrust of arguments about why the Commission behaves in this rather restrictive way is not related to the asymmetry in symbolic power between the Commission and the countries, but to the internal balance of interest in the EU.

Although our case study focuses primarily on the position of the partner countries, we also made some research into the position of the European Commission. The additional method we used here was content analysis. We focused mainly on the four strategic papers released by the European Commission (see below). We analysed four types of action here: (1) conditionality as a strategy transferred to the ENP from the enlargement process; (2) the logic of consequences related to rationalism; (3) the logic of appropriateness related to constructivism; and (4) the logic of

argumentation.⁵ In terms of coding, the four logics were related to different phrases used in the documents: conditionality was tied to those kinds of expressions that boil down to “if country A fulfils obligation B, then it will receive reward C from the EU”; the logic of consequences was related to expressions containing references to “interests”, “advantages” or “utility” and the like; the logic of appropriateness pertained to allusions to values, norms, and principles; and the logic of argumentation pertained to calls for discussions on an equal footing, deliberation, the efforts to find a consensual solution, etc.

Figure 1: The graphical result of our analysis



The graphical result of our analysis (Figure 1)⁶ reveals three main findings: First, it is clear that the logic of appropriateness and the logic of conditionality have steadily disappeared. While in the first analysed document, these two types of action constituted two thirds of all the cases, their presence decreased to approximately 42 percent in the 2007 paper. Conditionality is a typical instrument used in the enlargement process, and references to the concept abound in enlargement-related documents. The gradual vanishing of conditionality is, on the one hand, certainly related to the dislike of the term by the partner countries and the subsequent attempts of the European Commission to replace it with the less controversial term “benchmarking”. Yet on the other hand, it also shows that the relations have been moving towards the more pragmatic focus on trade cooperation.

⁵ Although it could be argued that conditionality is not an autonomous logic on par with the other three, we are convinced that due to its importance in both the enlargement process and the EU’s relations with its neighbourhood, it deserves to be treated separately.

⁶ The graph used here is also a part of Petr Kratochvíl and Ondřej Horký (2009) (unpublished manuscript) *Nothing is Imposed in this Policy*, Institute of International Relations, Prague.

Second, the importance of the other two logics, that of argumentation and that of consequences, has been continuously growing. This supports our findings from the interviews. The argumentation and consultations were identified as the key elements of the relations between the European Commission and the partner countries. At the same time, the argumentation served either to inform EU officials about the complaints of the partners or to convince the partner countries to accept the Commission's proposal. It almost never happened that the argumentation would lead to a substantial shift in the position of the EC. One possible explanation was the dependence of the EC on the stances of the EU member states when each of them draws several red lines (for instance, concerning the visa-free travel, trade in sensitive goods and services, agricultural products, etc.). Another explanation, complementary to the first, lies in the clearly perceived asymmetry between the EC and the partner countries which were forced to comply with the Commission's views irrespective of its tendency to ignore the partners' critique.

The gradual replacement of the constructivist, normatively-oriented rhetoric with the rationalist argumentation based on self-interest and egoistic utility maximisation is also reflected in the increase in the reliance on argumentation based on consequences. This also pertains to the last change, which started to take place only after 2004. From the first to the second document, the share of the logic of appropriateness remained more or less the same, and the frequency with which conditionality was invoked even increased. This means that in the first two documents, the European Commission also stressed the role of common values and identity. In the first, it even discussed the matter of enlargement (not ruling out these countries' accession in the long term). Yet, in the following years the Commission's position moved towards a more utilitarian orientation on common interests. Given the Commission's institutional power and its influence on the policy-makers in the partner countries, in the end it succeeded in persuading the partner countries that they should adopt a more pragmatic stance too.

Conclusion

Although some traces of the constructivist mode of behaviour remain (such as using the term "European perspective" as a synonym for EU accession – interview 3), the change of the countries' behaviour towards the EU is hard to miss. The talk about pragmatic cooperation focussing on common interests carries the day. The mutual relations have thus evolved in three phases: First, in the phase of strong constructivism from around the time the ENP was born, both the EU and the partner countries stressed the cultural similarities and the ideational factors that drew them together. In the second phase, weak rationalism, the European Commission changed its approach, stressing cooperation rather than integration and interests

rather than values. The partner countries, however, resisted this change for some time and tried to convince the EU that the original stance, which was more favourable for accession, should be preferred. This was reflected in the critical attitude towards the ENP (particularly on the part of Ukraine) and the persistent conviction that all the material benefits the policy can bring to the partners cannot offset the symbolic and normative importance of membership. Nevertheless, in the end the European Commission convinced the partner countries that due to the existence of “red lines” imposed by the member states, the membership goal should not be pursued or that the pursuit should be put off for an unspecified future moment. Instead, both sides dedicated all their attention to gaining material benefits from their partnership – be they stability, security, trade and limited migration as the main benefits for the EU, or incentives for domestic reforms, regulations and trade opportunities for the partner countries. In other words, the final phase was that of a strong rationalism, with both sides aiming at a maximization of their benefits.

Our case study also shows that within the relatively short period of time of the policy’s evolution, multiple changes in the relationship between the EU and its external partners were possible. Interestingly, the stronger actor (in our case, the European Commission) has been able not only to influence the normative orientation of the weaker partners, but also to induce a shift from the normatively-grounded policy to the interest-driven approach. This finding has three corollaries: First, while some strategies of the external actors like the rhetorical action (Schimmelfennig 2001) might have worked in the past, it is highly improbable that such a strategy would work again, as the case of Ukraine amply demonstrates. It is no longer possible to shame those Union members who oppose further enlargement since the shift to the “common interests” approach debilitates any normatively based argumentation. In terms of membership perspective, the situation of the current partner countries today and the Central European post-Communist countries at the beginning of the 1990s are similar at first glance. Both groups of countries fought vigorously for the full membership in the EU, which was, in both cases, resisted by an influential group of EU member states. However, while the rhetorical action was instrumental in gradually overcoming the negative stance of some EU member states to the enlargement in the 1990s, this strategy is doomed to fail today as our study shows.

Second, our case study suggests that the commonly held view of the arena of international relations as being either of the constructivist or the rationalist type is misleading. Instead, it is useful to explore the motivations of particular actors individually since their approaches may be very diverse. While the general orientation of an international actor is quite stable and hence switches between the rationalist and the constructivist modes of operation will be rare, particular bilateral relationships may be changing pretty frequently, possibly with every change of government.

Finally, we believe that this study opens up space for more research on various combinations of the rationalist and constructivist types of action. For instance, it would be interesting to explore to what extent individual countries (such as France, Germany, the United Kingdom and Poland, to name just a few interesting cases) in the EU tend to one or more of these ideal types.

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